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ABSTRACT

The learning that parents accomplish through informal involvement in running preschool learning groups was examined through a survey of adults who were actively involved in a Pre-School Learning Alliance program in 1 of 10 locations throughout England. Of the 632 adults contacted, 311 (nearly 50%) completed questionnaires. Approximately 60 respondents across the different locations agreed to be interviewed by telephone. All but two respondents were women, just over 94% were of white European origin, and 66.5% were between 30 and 39 years old. Nearly half left school at age 16, 5.7% left school at age 15 or under, 36% left at age 18, and 3.8% left later. The majority of respondents believed that they were deriving important benefits from their connection with a preschool. Social contacts, interest in child development, and improved child-oriented skills were unanimously considered the main benefits derived from involvement with a preschool, with increased self-confidence and a range of personal skills being ranked lower in importance but still considered very significant. Several respondents said that, as a direct result of their involvement with a preschool, they wished or intended to work with children. (The questionnaire and telephone interview schedule are appended.) (MN)

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Adults Learning in Pre-schools

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Adults Learning in Pre-schools

Veronica McGivney

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PRE-SCHOOLS MATTER

PRE SCHOOL LEARNING ALLIANCE

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Adults Learning in Pre-schools

Veronica McGivney

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Veronica McGivney

Introduction

This research was funded by the European Year of Lifelong Learning and conducted by Veronica McGivney, Research and Development Officer at NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, on behalf of the Pre-school Learning Alliance. The principal aim was to secure quantitative and qualitative data on the learning outcomes for adults who become actively involved in a Pre-school group.

Parental involvement in Pre-school education has been shown to have a positive impact on children's development and achievement. Research has shown that children who have attended Pre-school playgroups characterised by high levels of parental involvement perform as well as or better than children who attend maintained nursery schools. There is also anecdotal evidence that parents and carers who help in the running of Pre-schools derive considerable benefits from the experience.

Currently there is considerable interest in identifying and evaluating the learning outcomes of uncertificated adult learning, in mapping progression routes from informal to formal education and in identifying ways of helping people to develop transferable skills. All of these are pertinent to the Pre-school Learning Alliance – a network which offers adults informal and formal opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills at the same time as it offers children opportunities to learn and develop through informal play activities and interaction with others. Although the children's learning process is readily recognised, few are aware of the amount of learning undergone by parents, even the parents themselves. The Pre-school Learning Alliance has developed a range of education and training programmes for members and there will clearly be recognisable learning outcomes from participation in these. However, parents can also learn a considerable amount informally through their involvement in the running of a group. The principal aim of the study was to investigate the extent and nature of such gains. It was concerned with 'learning' in the broad sense of acquisition of transferable knowledge and skills, both personal and occupational, that may help people in any dimension of their lives.

Methods

Two methods were used in the study: a postal survey of a sample of Pre-school members in different geographical locations and different kinds of branches, and in-depth telephone interviews with a smaller sample of respondents.

The postal survey

The principal objectives of the postal survey (Appendix A) were to identify: the characteristics of respondents (school-leaving age, prior learning experience, employment status); the gains they could identify from their involvement in a Pre-school group; and the use to which they were putting any learning outcomes identified.

The survey was conducted between April and July 1996. To ensure a mix of geographical locations, a number of Pre-school branches in different parts of the country were contacted and group leaders asked to supply names and addresses of current or recent members. Not all agreed and some 'gatekeeping' problems were experienced, presumably because leaders wished to protect parents from what

seemed to be an unnecessary burden or intrusion. When lists of names were received, the members were sent the questionnaire with a prepaid envelope. Responses to the first mail-out were disappointingly low. Branches in other regions were subsequently contacted and a second set of questionnaires sent out.

In total 632 individuals were contacted and about 50 per cent responded. 311 completed questionnaires were returned from branches in Bury St Edmunds (13), Lewisham (38), Sutton (5), Hereford (4), Leicester (35), Northallerton (61), Chester (44), Brighton (5), Bristol (20) and Exeter (86).

228 (just over 73%) of respondents were involved in a Pre-school group which had the Alliance's charitable constitution (referred to in this report as category P); 45 (14.4%) were in a group that had another charitable constitution (category O) and 38 (just over 12%) in a group which did not have a charitable constitution (category N).

The telephone interviews

About 60 respondents across the different locations agreed to be interviewed by telephone and supplied dates and times when it would be convenient to make contact. The telephone interviews were conducted between September and October 1996. These aimed to explore in more depth the outcomes reported by respondents and any additional gains that had not been reported on the questionnaires (Appendix B).

The survey findings

The questionnaire responses were analysed using the SNAP package at NIACE. The findings are presented for all respondents, followed by any differences that emerged between groups with different constitutions. Since the numbers of respondents from groups O and N were small in comparison with those from groups with the PSLA charitable constitution, these differences, though sometimes striking, should be treated with caution and seen as a 'snapshot' rather than definitive.

Any significant differences that emerged according to student characteristics and specific branches are also noted. The findings on differences between branches should also be treated with caution, because of the disparities in the number of replies from each. Where the number of respondents from a branch was less than ten (namely Brighton (5), Hereford (4) and Sutton (5)), no comparisons have been made with the other branches.

Although the number of returned questionnaires returned was small, the findings nevertheless yield a valuable picture of the kind of outcomes that adults are likely to achieve from their involvement in a Pre-school.

Characteristics of respondents

(i) Sex and ethnic origin

All but two respondents were women. Despite the mix of locations the vast majority (just over 94%) were of white European origin. Fifteen described themselves as of Indian, black Caribbean, Pakistani, Chinese, black African, Filipino and East African Asian origin. The majority of these were in Lewisham (28.4% of respondents). The others were in Leicester, Bury St Edmunds and Bristol. (Two respondents did not answer this question.)

(ii) Age

The majority (66.5%) of respondents were aged between 30 and 39; 23.5% were in their twenties and 8.3% in their forties. Two were over 50 and one under 20. One respondent did not answer this question.

The age range was broadly similar across all types of group (P, O and N). Lewisham respondents tended to be younger than average with 37% in their 20s. The highest percentage of respondents in their 30s were from Chester (over 80%).

(iii) School leaving age

Nearly half (44%) of participants had left school at the age of 16 (see Figure 1, overleaf); 13.5% at 17; 36% at 18 and 3.8% at between 18 and 20+ (in some of the latter cases respondents had been educated abroad). 5.7% had left school at age 15 or under. (Three respondents did not answer this question.)

There were some differences between branches and types of group. The branches with the highest proportion of respondents who had left school at age 16 were Bristol and Exeter (60% and 45.3% respectively). Those with the highest percentage of respondents who left school at age 18 were Bury St Edmunds (46.2%), Chester (44.2%) and Northallerton (41%).

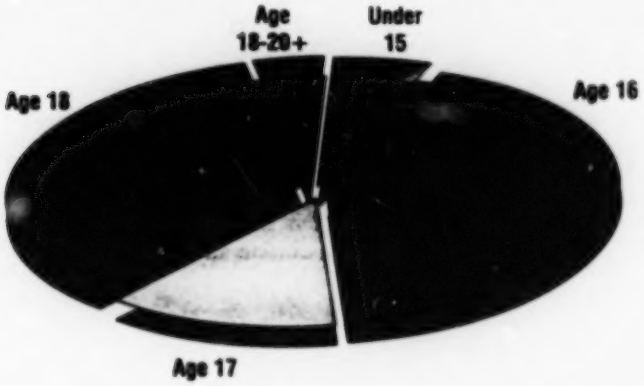

Figure 1: School leaving age of respondents.

Groups in the P category (i.e. those with the Alliance's charitable constitution) had the largest percentage of respondents who had left school at age 16 – 42.2% – compared with respondents in O groups (37.8%) and N groups (23.7%). Nearly 60% of respondents in N groups (those which did not have a charitable constitution) had left school at 18 compared with 33.2% in P groups and 35.6% in O groups. Although there were relatively few responses from groups in the N category (38), this does suggest that such groups tend to attract relatively well educated people. This was borne out by responses to the next question.

(iv) Qualifications held

The vast majority (over 92%) of respondents had some qualifications and only nine said they had none (see Figure 2). Fifteen others did not answer this question and it is probably fair to assume that they also had no qualifications.

Nearly 80% of those with qualifications had O-Levels or GCSEs and 36% had A-Levels. A number also had higher academic qualifications: 8.3% had a BA, nearly 4% a BSc, 2% a B.Ed and 6.4% a teacher training qualification or a Diploma or Certificate of Education. There was also a range of vocational qualifications: 20% had RSA qualifications, 10.6% City and Guilds and 7% BTEC qualifications. 1.6% had an NNEB. 33% also referred to other qualifications. Of these the ones most commonly mentioned were CSEs, Pitmans commerce and typing qualifications, SRN/RGN and other nursing qualifications, social work qualifications and qualifications as a dental nurse or dental technician. A range of other academic and vocational qualifications were also mentioned.

There were some differences between respondents in the different playgroup types. A significantly higher proportion of respondents in groups without a charitable constitution had A-Levels (50%) than respondents in groups P (33.2%) and O (40%). Similarly, a higher proportion of respondents in N groups had first degrees and teacher training qualifications (42.1%) than those in groups P (13.4%) and O (35.5%). On the other hand, a significantly higher overall percentage of respondents in P groups (with the PSLA constitution) had vocational qualifications such as City and Guilds, BTEC and RSA (67.3%) than respondents in O groups (19.7%) and N groups (18.4%).

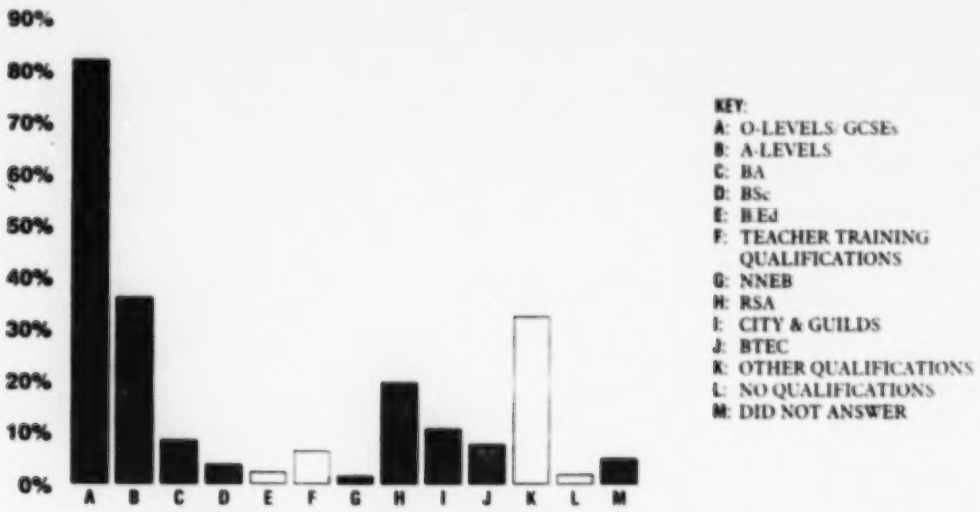

Figure 2: Qualifications held by respondents.

Groups in the O category had the highest proportion of individual respondents with City and Guilds qualifications (13.3 %) and groups in the N category had the highest proportion of individual respondents with a BTEC (10.5%). All the respondents with no qualifications were in P groups.

Respondents from the Northallerton, Exeter, Leicester, Lewisham and Chester branches had the widest range of qualifications above O- and GCSE level (which is unsurprising since the greatest number of responses were from these branches).

(v) Current occupational status

Over half (52%) of respondents described themselves as full-time homemakers; 31% were employed part-time and a very small proportion, 7.3%, were working full-time. A further 5% were self-employed, 1.2% were registered unemployed and 1.6% described themselves as 'other' without specifying their status. A further 1.2% did not answer the question (see Figure 3).

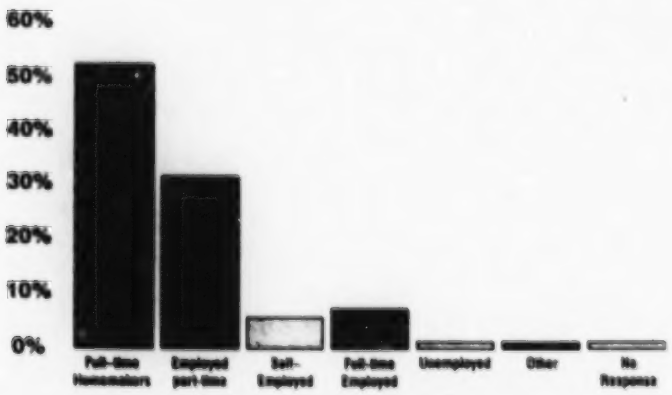

Figure 3: Occupational status of respondents.

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One respondent was a qualified doctor of medicine and another was a midwife. Several were members of institutions such as the Chartered Institution of Bankers, the Institute of Housing Management, the Institute of Export Diploma, the Institute of Linguists, the Institute of Legal Executives, the Institute of Personnel and Development and the Physical Education Association.

Again there were some differences between groups and branches. A higher proportion of respondents in P groups were full-time homemakers (56.5%) than in groups O (42.2%) and N (39.5%). Correspondingly, a higher proportion of respondents in N groups were in full-time employment – 10.5% – than in the other two groups (P: 7.6%; O: 4.4%). Respondents from O groups, however, had the largest proportion of part-time workers (40%) compared with those in N groups (39.5%) and P groups (27.4%). If the percentages of respondents in full- and part-time employment are combined then it is clear that the greatest proportion of employed respondents were in the groups without a charitable constitution.

Conversely, though the number of registered unemployed respondents was extremely low, they were also to be found mainly in N groups.

Where the different branches are concerned, Northallerton respondents included the highest proportion of full-time homemakers (64%) and those from Lewisham the highest proportion of full-time employed (15.8%). A significantly higher percentage of respondents from Leicester were in part-time employment (54.3%) than from any other area. Exeter had the next highest – 36%.

Respondents from Northallerton and Chester included the highest proportions of self-employed individuals – over 9% in both cases. The highest percentage of registered unemployed respondents were from Bury St Edmunds – 7.7% (but as the overall number of respondents from this branch was relatively small this may be an insignificant finding).

In some particulars, notably age range and occupational status, the respondent profile reflects the general PSLA membership profile. In other ways it differs slightly: i.e. respondents included slightly fewer people of non-European origin and more people with higher qualifications.

Reactions to the questionnaire

While most of the returned questionnaires were completed in a very positive spirit, a few respondents were surprised at the questions asked. Reactions varied according to individuals' degree of involvement with the group. Some felt they were not sufficiently active in the running in groups for the questions to be relevant and others were resistant to the notion that they, as well as their children, might benefit from belonging to a Pre-school:

> *'I don't think this form is very relevant to me as I only helped occasionally as a parent on a rota basis.'*

> *'I don't find this particularly relevant. My daughter attends a playgroup which I occasionally help out at I have (sic) no significant changes to myself through this.'*

'I gained infinite pleasure from contact with the children and parents. I have no need to categorise or quantify this experience.'

'Absolutely no gains! I feel playgroups are for the benefit of the children. The parents benefit from having a break from the children and the playgroup ethos will be lost if it is diluted by trying to tag any adult learning on it. There is more than enough opportunity for adults to learn if they want to.'

Several respondents who were working as nannies thought the questions only applied to parents while others who were in employment, had other small children or who were using Pre-schools without a charitable constitution, had very limited involvement and therefore found the questions difficult to answer:

'I'm not really involved in the PSLA. My three-year-old daughter goes to the playgroup. I take her there and fetch her and that's about the sum total of my commitment. I don't think I'm the best candidate for these questions!'

'As I work full-time I have minimum involvement/contact with my daughter's playgroup. The childminder takes her.'

'Although my child attends playgroup unfortunately I am unable to take a full and active role as I have another 12-month-old'

The responses as a whole, however, indicated that the majority of those who had completed the questionnaire were deriving a number of important benefits from their connection with a Pre-school.

Perceived gains from involvement in Pre-schools

Respondents were asked to identify from a list of 18 possible gains those they considered most or least significant and to identify any other benefits not included in the list. They could tick as many items as appropriate. The results are given in the table overleaf.

If we combine with these totals the number of times these items were rated as 'quite significant', the order slightly changes. The total significance scale shows the top six gains remaining the same but social skills, self-confidence and practical skills taking on a greater overall importance.

Social contacts, interest in child development and improved child-oriented skills were therefore unanimously considered the main benefits respondents derived from their involvement with Pre-schools, with increased self-confidence and a range of personal skills being ranked lower in importance although still considered very significant.

As expected, involvement in a Pre-school had helped many parents and carers to interact and deal more effectively with their children at home. One said she was far more creative in the way she helped her children and another, of Asian origin, said that involvement had taught her 'how to play games and recite nursery rhymes with children at home'.

New friends/social contacts	196
Greater interest in child development	195
Increased knowledge of child development	181
Increased ability to help children learn	163
Better relationships with children	159
Increased ability to organise and manage children's play	150
Improved communication skills	94
Greater self-confidence and self-esteem	90
Improved social skills	86
New practical skills	85
Improved sense of general well-being	82
Better relationships with other family members	79
Confidence to undertake learning activities	76
Improved organisational skills	75
Wider personal aspirations	61
Interest in a wider range of jobs	52
Greater readiness to seek employmen	51
Improved literacy/numeracy skills	38

Table 1: Perceived gains identified as extremely or very significant, by frequency of mention.

(i) Comments

Many of the respondents who identified benefits from their involvement amplified their responses in comments. These confirmed the perceived importance of greater understanding of child development through creative play; the social and community aspects of Pre-schools and the enhanced self-confidence and personal skills that can be acquired through being a member of a Pre-school:

'Pleasure and satisfaction in seeing children learning through play and interacting happily with others.'

'Have gained an insight into what my child does at play school and what he may gain from attending.'

'(It has helped me in) reading books to my son, helping him, helping his learning activities, writing, games. Also feeding , cleaning, cooking, washing and dressing him, and in training for my job.'

'Has made me more creative with kids at home.'

'Have acquired skills in helping at the playgroup.'

'It has positively affected my family relationships.'

'Greater awareness of my responsibility to provide my children with structure and social awareness and not just love and support, and how to achieve it.'

'Satisfaction at being involved in a community organisation serving the local community.'

'Having arrived from Australia only five months ago, the playgroup has been an important social contact for me and my children.'

'I moved here just before having my first child and found Pre-school involvement not only gave me new friends and social contacts but has also made me feel part of the local community. From well-paid single career woman to low income single-parent household made me feel somewhat inadequate as a parent but Pre-school involvement means I am doing something not only for the community but more importantly for my child.'

'Support from parents of other young children.'

'I am presently chairwoman and with the committee am trying to raise money for a mobile classroom at the village school. This is something I would not have thought I could do until I joined the committee.'

'It has heightened my awareness of the lack of skills in parents of promoting {children's} language development. This is an inner city area with quite young parents – numerous single-parent families and often social problems. This {group} provides a great chance to form a network with each other.'

'As my daughter is disabled with Cerebral Palsy, I think it {the playgroup} is making others aware of special needs.'

'My communication skills have been greatly improved.'

'I have gained an insight into what my child does at playschool and what he may gain from attending.'

(ii) Changes of direction

Several respondents commented that, as a direct result of their involvement, they now wished or intended to work with children. A number had already become playgroup leaders, some were running Mother and Toddler groups and several had embarked on teacher training courses. One had become a PSLA tutor and was now training as an infant school teacher; another had decided to take an NVQ in playgroup training. In virtually all cases this represented a complete career change.

(iii) Perceptions of few gains

About 15% of respondents reported no or few gains. In most of these cases, they already had professional experience of working with children and other adults. For example, a qualified teacher said that she considered the playgroup experience to be just 'an extension' of her teaching experience and therefore she had derived no particular benefits. A woman running a day nursery reported that any new skills and knowledge she acquired arose from that work. Similarly, a practising health visitor wrote:

'I already have more skills in the child development area than could be learned at a playgroup therefore no new skills or knowledge gained.'

A few individuals took the opportunity to express a grievance about the way in which a particular group was run. One respondent who was a part-time probation officer and ante-natal teacher claimed that the most she had learned from her involvement with a particular group was *'how not to run a playgroup!'* Another expressed reservations about the Pre-school tradition of parent management:

> *I'm sorry to sound so negative in my responses but my personal experience of Pre-school and the local branch of the PSLA only serves to illustrate their need for parents/carers who already have skills or specialist knowledge to become involved. The idea that Pre-schools can be run efficiently by a management committee whose members are constantly changing and do not have sufficient time to acquire basic skills is somewhat optimistic.'*

Some different patterns of response emerged according to branch, type of group and student characteristics.

(iv) Differences between groups

Whereas the most highly rated benefits were generally the same across the three categories of Pre-school group, some quite strong differences emerged between respondents from groups O (groups with another charitable constitution) and the others: for example, respondents from O groups were strikingly less likely than the others to consider new friends and social contacts 'extremely significant' (6.7% as compared with 32.7% in groups P and 28.9% in groups N), although a larger percentage than in the other groups considered this to be 'very significant'. Nearly 9% of respondents from O category groups said the social element was not significant compared with only 4% of respondents from P groups and 2.6% from N groups.

Respondents from O groups also considered improved ability to organise play activities as a less significant outcome than respondents in the other groups: 20% of O respondents said it was of no significance compared to 12.6% in P groups and 15.8% in N groups.

Group O respondents also considered readiness to seek employment as a less significant outcome than the those from the other groups. Conversely, however, group O respondents placed markedly more emphasis on the significance of improved basic skills than the other groups. They were also nearly half as likely as the other groups to report few or no overall gains from involvement in a Pre-school and the most likely to report other benefits not included on the prompt list.

These differences are hard to explain as they do not correlate with the different characteristics (qualifications, occupational status) of the groups described above. Other differences are more readily explicable. For example, respondents in groups with the PSLA charitable constitution (which had the largest percentage of full-time homemakers) were far more likely to consider increased self-confidence as extremely or very significant (40%) than those in the other groups, both of which had larger proportions of respondents in paid employment. On the other hand group P participants rated improved social skills as less significant than members of other groups but improved communication skills as considerably more significant.

Group P respondents were also far less likely to attach importance to wider employment opportunities than the other groups. Group N respondents (a higher

proportion of whom had academic and professional qualifications and full-time employment) were the least likely to report wider aspirations and the most likely to report few gains from involvement.

(v) Differences between branches

Although a high proportion of respondents from all the branches rated social contacts as one of the most important outcomes of involvement in a Pre-school, there were some disparities: 77% of those replying from Bury St Edmunds rated this extremely or very significant followed by 71.4% of respondents from Leicester; 70% from Bristol; 66.3% from Exeter; 65% from Chester and 57.4% from Northallerton.

Respondents from Bristol were most likely to cite increased self-confidence, increased social and communication skills, new practical skills and organisational skills as very or extremely significant outcomes of their involvement in a Pre-school while respondents from Lewisham attached least significance to these elements.

The largest proportion of respondents to rate improved relationships with their children as extremely or very important were from the Bristol and Northallerton branches.

The largest proportion of respondents to rate improved relationships with other family members as extremely or very important were from the Bristol and Leicester branches.

Bury St Edmunds had the highest percentage of respondents rating increased interest in and knowledge of child development as an extremely or very important gain, followed by those from Northallerton and Exeter. Bury St Edmunds also had the highest percentage of respondents citing improved skills at helping children learn as a very or extremely significant gain, and together with respondents from Bristol, were the most likely to consider increased ability to organise children's play as a very or extremely significant outcome. Respondents from the same two branches were also the most likely to refer to a greater readiness to seek employment. Respondents from Bristol were the most likely of all the groups to cite interest in a wider range of jobs as a very or extremely important outcome and were strikingly more likely than respondents from other the branches to rate increased readiness to undertake learning as an important outcome: 55% of Bristol respondents said this was very or extremely significant compared with the next highest percentage – 28.6% of Leicester respondents).

A larger proportion of respondents from Bristol than from the other branches considered an improved sense of general well-being as a very or extremely significant gain (35%), followed by Leicester (31.5%).

A larger proportion of respondents from the Leicester, Northallerton and Bristol branches than from the other areas considered improved basic skills as a very or extremely significant gain.

The branch with the highest percentage of respondents reporting few outcomes was, surprisingly given the preceding information, Bristol where 10% of respondents said this was very significant. Next came respondents from Bury St Edmunds (7.7%).

(vi) Differences according to student characteristics

There was a very strong correlation between perceptions of outcomes and school leaving age. Far greater significance was attached by those who left school at age 15/16 than those who left school at age 17/18 to increases in self-confidence, improved general well-being, social skills, practical skills and organisational skills. The earliest leavers also attached most significance to improved communication skills (although these were rated relatively highly by all respondents whatever their school leaving age).

Similarly, those who left school at the earliest age were most likely to report wider aspirations and interest in seeking new or more varied employment. They were also by far the most likely to report confidence and motivation to undertake learning activities.

Interest in and knowledge of child development were judged most significant, again by those who left school at the earliest age.

Better relationships with children were rated of high significance by respondents in all categories. However, those who left school at 18 were the least likely to report better relationships with other family members as an important outcome. This group also attached less importance than the others to ability to organise and manage children's play.

The pattern only changes in relation to new friends and social networks: this outcome was, perhaps surprisingly, considered of highest significance by those who left school at age 18.

Differences also emerged according to the type of qualification held. Those with no qualifications and vocational qualifications, particularly City and Guilds, were likely to rate increased self-confidence, social skills, new practical skills and improved literacy skills higher than those with academic qualifications. The same groups, together with those with O-Levels and GCSEs, also attached higher importance than the others to better communication skills and ability to help children learn.

Those with academic qualifications attached particular importance to better relationships with children and greater ability in organising play activities. Increased motivation to learn was rated of highest importance by respondents with O-Levels or GCSEs, by those with vocational qualifications and by those with no qualifications.

Full-time homemakers attached the greatest importance to increased self-confidence, social skills, communication skills, practical skills, wider aspirations and a sense of greater well-being. Together with part-time employed respondents, they were also most likely to report better relationships with children and family, an interest in seeking work and a wider variety of jobs and new confidence and motivation to undertake learning.

Respondents who were in full-time employment tended to rate the following as the most important outcomes: better relationships with their children and other family members; improved communication skills; ability to help children learn and organise their play; and social contacts.

Participation in PSLA courses

About a fifth of respondents – 20.5% – had participated in PSLA courses. The overwhelming majority of these were in the groups with the PSLA charitable constitution. Several respondents who had not attended any courses said they would like to or intended to. Some had already applied to attend courses that were being held in the future.

The branch where the highest percentage of participants in PSLA courses was Bristol (40%) followed by Bury St Edmunds (30.8%), Exeter (24.4%) and Northallerton (23%). A far smaller percentage of respondents had attended courses in Lewisham (13.2), Leicester (11.4%) and Chester (4.7%).

The respondents most likely to have attended PSLA courses were full-time homemakers or part-time employees who had left school at age 16 or 17 with some O-levels or GCSEs. Some had vocational qualifications. The widest range of different courses had been attended by respondents from Northallerton, Exeter and Bury St Edmunds. In these branches some members had attended as many as twelve or more different courses.

First Aid	23
Learning Through Play	17
Basic	15
Diploma in Pre-school Practice	10
Introduction to Child Observation	9
Special Needs	9
Foundation	8
Equal Opportunities	7
Child Development	5
Committees	5
Business and Administration	4
Management	4
Parent and Toddler	4
Pre-school curriculum	3
Tutor fieldwork	2
Care and Education for under-twos	1
Study skills	1
Business side (of Pre-school groups)	1
(NB a number of individuals had attended more than one course)	

Table 2: PSLA courses attended by respondents, by frequency of mention.

Fourteen respondents had attended courses or workshops that were not included in the questionnaire list. These included information events on the nursery voucher scheme, a Partners in Reading scheme and courses or workshops on aspects of safety, child protection, child abuse, multicultural awareness, partnerships with parents, record-keeping, and behaviour and legal responsibilities. Of these the most frequently mentioned were information days on the voucher scheme and courses on safety.

(i) Learning outcomes from participation

Respondents were asked to indicate what they considered the most important learning outcomes they derived from their participation in PSLA courses. Responses revealed some differences according to respondent characteristics, notably:

- improved ability to study, learning confidence and gaining qualifications were judged more important by respondents who had left school under the age of 18 than those who had left school at 18 and over.
- improved basic and analytical skills were reported by a larger proportion of those who left school at age 16 and under than those who left school at a later age.
- those who left school at age 17, 18 or older were likely to rate the significance of business skills and knowledge of legislation relating to voluntary groups slightly higher than those who left school earlier.
- those with vocational qualifications tended to list a wider range of learning outcomes than those with academic qualifications.

Greater understanding of the value of play	43
Increased knowledge and understanding of child development (physical, educational, social, etc)	43
Increased knowledge about how children (and adults) learn	39
Ability to organise and manage play activities	36
Knowledge and understanding of legislation affecting children and services for children	36
Increased knowledge and understanding of child health, nutrition or safety	33
Increased knowledge/understanding of children with disabilities or special educational needs	32
Greater knowledge/understanding of equal opportunities issues	32
A qualification or possibility of progression towards a qualification	31
Knowledge and understanding of legislation affecting voluntary and charitable organisations	30
Greater confidence in ability to learn and motivation to continue learning	28
Improved organisational and administration skills	23
Improved study skills	22
Fundraising skills	20
People management skills	19
Business and financial management skills	15
Improved literacy and numeracy skills	13
Improved analytical skills	13
No or few benefits	3

Table 3: Extremely or very significant perceived outcomes from participation in PSLA courses, by frequency of mention.

The list of learning outcomes correlates generally and not surprisingly with the kind of courses followed. However, it is still worth noting that, overall, increased knowledge of the value of play and knowledge of children's development were considered the most significant gains from attending PSLA courses, together with legislation affecting services for children and health and safety factors if all degrees of significance are taken into account. Gaining or working towards a qualification, understanding of disability and special educational needs, and understanding of legislation affecting voluntary and charitable bodies were also considered very significant outcomes if all significance ratings are combined.

The responses to this question show that many participants also derived significant personal benefits from attending PSLA courses. These included greater confidence in their ability to learn and increased motivation to learn. Some members had acquired a taste for education as a direct result of attending PSLA courses. For example, one woman who had left school at 16 with some O-levels had attended 13 Alliance courses and claimed she had derived a great number of skills and benefits from all of them. Another who had attended 12 courses also itemised a number of significant gains and added that attending the courses had taught her:

> *'how to open up, discuss and help others with problems related to previous experiences and to be at ease with children.'*

In some cases all the adults involved in a Pre-school group were engaged in a learning programme:

> *'Students taking a GNVQ support this group and we are teaching them parenting skills – immense gains for students and local community!'*

> *'The parent and toddler group have implemented one family learning project funded by BSI and another by winning a Barclays Futures Award of £3,000.'*

A number of respondents reported the acquisition of new skills from attending courses. One said she had acquired new management skills and another (who had taken a course on committees) found that it 'clarified' her position as an officer on the group committee: 'Without it I would have been oblivious to many of the responsibilities it entailed.' A third who had attended a Learning Through Play course had decided to organise a British Red Cross course for childcare:

> *'which probably wouldn't have occurred to me if I hadn't done the PSLA course and people there showed an interest.'*

(ii) Use of skills and knowledge gained through involvement in Pre-schools

Respondents were asked how they were applying the new skills or information they had acquired through involvement in a Pre-school (either just through being a member or through participating in courses). Their responses indicated that:

- 77% were applying them at home.
- 22% in other organisations.
- 14% in their current employment.

- 10% to help them progress to further or higher education, or training
- 7% to help find a job.
- 5.5% in own or family business.
- 5.5% to gain a qualification.
- 2% to change jobs.
- 6.7% in other ways.

(NB: A number of respondents listed several items, hence the total exceeds 100%.)

Respondents' comments illustrated the ways in which new skills and knowledge were being used:

- One woman had been so enthused by playgroup procedures and the courses she had attended that she had become a PSLA tutor and was now taking a B.Ed in order to become an infant teacher.

- A mother who had attended a First Aid course had become the First Aider in the Parent and Toddler group.

- One respondent claimed she was applying the skills and knowledge she had gained in a Pre-school in 'all areas' of her life. She found they were also helping her to help cope with a difficult situation in her own family where one child had special needs.

- A number of parents said their involvement had provided them with transferable skills that enabled them to become ancillary workers in schools and school governors: 'involvement has helped me in my duties as governor of a primary school.'

- Several were adding the experience they had gained at a Pre-school to CVs and portfolios and using them to help in job applications.

- Several had decided to work with children as a career as a result of their involvement with a Pre-school group and some were already using their skills in new roles as childminders, playgroup assistants, foster parents and ancillary workers in schools. One woman – a former customer service administrator – reported that the experience at the playgroup had enabled her to set up a playgroup of her own. She was planning to attend the PSLA diploma class in the new term.

- Some women were using their new skills and knowledge in other voluntary organisations.

The interview findings

There is always a danger with surveys that responses may be superficial: people often fill them in rapidly or carelessly because of limited time. In this case, some may have exaggerated their responses in order to say what they felt was expected or acceptable. On the other hand, some may have completed the questionnaire without sufficient reflection and therefore may have underestimated the impact on them of involvement in a Pre-school group. It can also be difficult to pinpoint the exact impact of any new situation or activity on one's life and personal development.

For this reason a number of telephone interviews were conducted with volunteers in order to investigate the responses in more depth. These were held in September and October 1996. About 60 of the original 114 people who said they would be prepared to respond in more depth agreed, on being approached again, to have a telephone interview and supplied numbers and times when they would be available. Some of the numbers proved unobtainable and several individuals proved difficult to contact. A total of 50 were eventually interviewed. All but one of these were women and all but one were of white European origin.

Some respondents had volunteered to be interviewed out of curiosity, because they were intrigued by the exercise. Others agreed to be interviewed because they were active and dedicated members of their Pre-school group.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each, depending on how forthcoming subjects were and their circumstances at the time: for example, some interviews were conducted against a background of clamours for attention from small children which made it difficult for the mother to concentrate and reduced the time she could spend on the telephone.

Inevitably the amount and quality of information gleaned from each person varied as some were more at ease than others speaking to a stranger on the telephone and also found it easier to reflect on their experience.

In many cases conversations strayed away from considering the benefits of Pre-school involvement to themselves towards considering the benefits to their children. There was widespread anxiety about the potential impact of the nursery voucher scheme especially among interviewees belonging to smaller groups. Some interviewees also took the opportunity to express their feelings about a particular group or about Pre-schools in general. One was very critical of the PSLA for changing its name, for relying on parental involvement and for keeping fees 'unrealistically low.' Another was critical of the PSLA for agreeing to take on desired learning objectives:

It was important to let people express their views freely during interviews as their feelings about their child's progress or about Pre-schools in general tended to be intimately bound up with their perceptions of the benefits to themselves of involvement in a particular group.

Summaries of interviews

Each summary is preceded by the date of interview, the interviewee's initial, the group branch code and the code describing the group's constitution (P, O or N).

1) 18/09/96, B, 25101, P

B stressed how much she has enjoyed being involved in the Pre-school group for the last four years. She joined the group after returning from abroad. At that time she was very shy, withdrawn and feeling isolated. Involvement with the group has made an enormous difference to her life: she described it as a stepping stone to other things.

She has made many friends through her involvement and has learned a great deal from seeing her children develop and progress to school.

She has been secretary of the group for the last three years. This has entailed a lot of paperwork and involvement in a range of fundraising activities such as sponsored events, parents' lunches, parties, etc. This has enhanced her organisational, secretarial and typing skills and improved her ability to communicate with and relate to others. She is highlighting these skills in her CV which, at the time of the interview, she was preparing for an interview for a job as receptionist/telephonist.

During the interview B mentioned enjoyment and self-confidence frequently and she identified these as the major benefits she had derived from involvement with Pre-schools: 'It's given me enormous confidence. I'd be lost without it.'

She also reported 'better conversation' and social skills.

She enjoys being involved so much that even though her two children are now at school she is continuing as secretary. Her husband complains that he never sees her as: 'I'm always down there'. She is also frequently called to replace playgroup leaders when they are ill or absent.

2) 23/09/96, M, 28303, P

M has been involved with the Pre-school group for two years and described it as a very positive experience. She joined when she moved to the village and it has helped her to get to know people with children and given her a more active social life: 'We've been drawn into the community.'

As she has an NNEB she already has considerable knowledge about children and their development and needs. However, her work on the management committee has given her both an insight into a different sector and the confidence to take over as leader of the toddler group, a role which engages her in organising activities, buying equipment, doing the books, etc, which are all new skills. She is also very involved in fundraising activities.

She is now on a policy sub-committee investigating accreditation in the light of the incoming voucher scheme which will mean the playgroup will be competing with schools and private nurseries. As it is a small village she feels the group is very vulnerable and they are hoping to get it accredited so that it attracts more parents: 'we need areas such as health and safety, discipline, etc, pulled into shape'. She is finding this activity a very useful learning exercise.

Although she feels Pre-school staff are very poorly paid she thinks the level to which children are helped is 'marvellous.' Her own eldest child has developed considerably through attending the group.

3) 23/09/96, W, 24502, R

W has been involved in the playgroup for 18 months. The main gains she identified were increased self-confidence and a wider social network. She also felt it had helped her to interact with other adults: 'It's very difficult to make contacts when you have small children.'

She sees the group as a unifying organisation with a vital community and networking role: 'it helps you to become a more useful member of the community'.

She is part of the management team and is involved in planning children's activities and the curriculum. She has also attended a Learning Through Play course. This was drawn to her attention through the playgroup and she was able to attend because it was delivered near to her home. The course was very useful to her work in a nursery class as it enhanced her skills and gave her ideas on how to organise play there: 'It made me realise that academic training isn't the best way of learning'. (She has a degree in Psychology.)

She is now thinking of taking the PSLA Diploma in Pre-school Practice but may have to wait until her children are at school because she also helps out on the farm where she lives on an ad hoc basis. She feels rather 'vague' about the future at the moment.

4) 23/09/96, N, 22108, R

N has been involved for over four years in the Under Fives group. On the questionnaire she only ticked friends and social contacts as an important outcome. From speaking to her it was obvious that she had gained far more than she realised.

N described her connection with the group as a very positive experience from which she has derived a lot of enjoyment and social contacts. As she works full-time and does not have the time to make friends this is very important to her. Although she works as a nursery nurse and already has many skills in dealing with children, she has found the group has helped her to deal with her first child who has a disability. She has learned a lot from staff methods of dealing with special needs.

> *'They gave me ideas about what to do at home and it reassured me that what I was doing wasn't completely wrong. I really got more from it than just making friends.'*

She is on the group management committee and this has given her 'a view into how these places work and how the finances work'. For example, she has gained insights into committee working, accounts, wages and record-keeping at a time when there have been lots of cuts to deal with. Through this she has gained knowledge of different ways of working in different sectors and localities and this has been an eye-opener. It has given her ideas and insights that she is using in her paid work:

'I have seen things I can change and adapt in the nursery where I work as a result of being involved here.'

She has also recognised some of the emotional difficulties for mothers who bring very small children to playgroups, and this has helped her in her work.

She is now interested in becoming a school governor but will stay involved with the group as *'these links are quite important'*.

5) 24/09/96, L, 25101, R

L has been involved in Pre-school groups for over ten years as she has four children. She identified the greatest personal benefit as meeting people since, living in the country and on a farm, she had previously been socially isolated. However, she realised, as we talked, that she had gained far more benefits from her involvement: *'I had not really thought about it before'*.

She felt that involvement with the group had also given her a huge boost in confidence and increased her social and communication skills considerably. She had previously been very shy. She had started working as a playgroup leader one morning a week and realised that she had learned a great deal from this experience about child development, working with children, organising play activities and craft skills:

'It made me realise that all children develop at different rates and aren't the same. It stops you worrying. I realised that my children are normal and other people's children are just the same'.

She is now chair of the management committee and also chairs several other local committees. She realises that without involvement in the Pre-school group she probably would not have had the confidence to take on such activities:

'Without the Pre-school group I probably would have been stuck here, on the farm. Now I have a far more busy and fulfilling life. In fact my life is so full I don't know how to fit everything in.'

6) 24/09/96, P, 28303, P

P had been involved with the group for two years and helped out on one day a week. She enjoyed this on the whole, particularly meeting other parents with children. She was also secretary of the management committee for two years. She found this very hard work as she had to learn to type, take minutes, write newsletters and perform other tasks. She admitted that these were useful skills which encouraged her to agree to take on the role of secretary of the local school PTA. However, she had some reservations about the Pre-school group: it was a very small group and she and other members felt that too much responsibility was thrust upon them and that they were expected to do too much, particularly with regard to writing policy papers. They were required to produce four or five of these and all members of the small management team were involved. She was specifically involved in writing the paper on safety and found this a huge responsibility as the policy had to be adopted. Although there were some written guidelines, she felt these were not strong enough and she and the other authors were very aware that what they wrote would affect children long after their involvement in writing the policy. As they were all lay people without experience

in this area, she could not understand why there were no professional checks on what they were doing She had attended a study day on health and safety but did not find this very helpful. Although she and others voiced their concerns during the day they did not feel they were taken seriously enough:

> *'We needed more help with the writing of the policy. The study day made us more worried because it made safety more our responsibility. I was just a mother of a three-year-old girl. This wasn't my job. We were just ordinary parents.'*

Similarly, she felt that too much responsibility was placed on a small management committee when they were given the task of appointing a leader and a supervisor.

> *'We were expected to draw up a contract and job description. None of us had done this before. We're just parents! Then we had to interview someone. This requires specific skills and experience and we didn't have them.'*

She was concerned that playgroup staff were too poorly paid and hoped that the nursery voucher scheme would result in better pay and conditions.

7) 24/09/96, S-B, 22219, N.

S-B has been involved with the group for nine years and is enormously enthusiastic about it. For seven years she has been chair of the management committee.

She identified a series of personal benefits and learning outcomes from her involvement. She has become more involved in the community and has enjoyed seeing children learning to play and mix with others and meeting other parents. She has achieved greater awareness of how children develop. She has also learned to work as part of a team and has become aware of 'all sorts of issues and areas' such as fundraising and group self-management. She has improved her social skills and is now able to ask people to do things 'in a tactful way'. She has also learned to deal with children with special needs and gained incidental skills such as writing newsletters.

When asked to prioritise these gains she identified the greatest ones as control of and involvement in her children's early years; increased awareness of the importance of Pre-school learning years; increased social contacts and networking and greater involvement in *'how the world ticks'* (through committee work).

She has taken the Pre-school diploma course involving one day a week for a year. She attended the course after it was brought to her attention by a PSLA representative. As it was delivered 'on her doorstep' she was able to attend. The course has been enormously useful to her: it has boosted her confidence both in general and as an adult learner; it has given her insights into a range of areas and issues such as multiculturalism and children with special needs; it has enriched her work on behalf of the group; it has helped her as a parent, bringing up her own children, and it has also given her a marketable qualification that she has used to acquire paid employment. As a result of gaining the diploma she has been able to move into new areas of work: she is now a registered childminder and has also found a job as a midday supervisor at the local school.

At the time of the interview S-B was planning to take other PSLA courses on special needs and record-keeping. She strongly promotes PSLA courses to other members of the group.

The confidence and experience gained from her involvement in the playgroup have encouraged S-B to take on a range of other community roles. As well as all her other activities she is a school governor, treasurer of another PSLA group, chair of a local fundraising committee and is involved in the Parish Council. She claims that without the playgroup experience and the diploma course she never would have had the confidence to take on these roles:

> *'It has helped me in all the areas I want to enter. I'm absolutely sold on the PSLA. I never would have had the confidence to do the diploma course or chair the management committee without the group. It really helps people if they get involved. The greatest problem we have at the moment is to get people to take on voluntary management roles but I know how much it would help them all round if they did.'*

8) 24/09/96, L, 28303, R

L has been involved in the Pre-school group for two to three years. She was formerly the chair and is now secretary of the management committee. She has found this satisfying but very demanding:

> *'It's hassle-making as it means a lot of work, time and effort. It's hugely rewarding but takes its toll. The price of belonging to the playgroup is very high, particularly in the last few years as there has been a huge amount of work to do to comply with all the new standards and requirements from Social Services, etc.'*

Her work on the committee has involved her in fundraising, purchasing equipment, staff employment, record-keeping, book-keeping, insurance, hall hire, lighting and heating, the parent rota, health and safety and keeping policies up-to-date. As a result of working in all these areas, L feels she has learned an enormous amount and acquired new skills which she is adding to her CV, as she intends to return to work when her children are older.

Like some other interviewees, L feels that the work she does for the group encroaches a bit too much on her life and that expectations are perhaps too high of unpaid volunteers (although she understands why this is the case). She foresees problems in maintaining voluntary effort when the nursery voucher scheme is in operation, and she wonders whether the group will survive. She thinks the PSLA has been good at providing information and has attended several of their day workshops which she found useful. However, she feels more support should be provided on how groups should handle the new situation caused by the introduction of vouchers.

9) 24/09/96, F, 24502, R

F has been involved with the Pre-school group for three years, having previously been a member of two others. She is the current chair of the management committee and was formerly its secretary. She finds this role very demanding and a lot more difficult in the last few years because of all the changes and new requirements as a result of the Children Act. She feels a lot of responsibility is

now placed on a few people's shoulders. For this reason she finds that officers are hard to replace and people are: *'backing off from doing it because they think it will be hard'.*

F identified the greatest personal gain from her involvement as self-confidence and assertiveness. She feels more positive about herself as she is now *'doing more than childcare'.* She finds involvement also offers her stimulation: *'I can switch off from the children although what I'm doing still involves them'.*

From a learning point of view she feels she has gained organisational skills and communication skills. Being on the committee has obliged her to deal with a variety of people and given her insights into how playgroups are run. Altogether her life has broadened. She has become more involved in the community and is now on the Village Hall committee and a is member of the school PTA. She is also thinking of becoming a school assistant which will give her the opportunity to transfer her knowledge and skills. She would not have considered doing this prior to joining the Pre-school.

10) 24/09/96, D, 23401, O.

D's child goes to a large playgroup attached to a school. She had been surprised and intrigued when she received the PSLA questionnaire since:

> *'parents don't get involved at this playgroup either as helpers or on the management committee. We literally stand outside. It's only this term that they've asked people to help because there's some observation going on'.*

She therefore had little to report in terms of learning or other outcomes. Although she had no doubt that the children benefit greatly from attending the group, the extent of her gains was contact with a few parents when standing outside. She was interested in Pre-school courses but had heard that you had to be actively involved in a playgroup to participate in them.

11) 24/09/96 B, 21501, N.

This interviewee was in a similar situation and could not identify any personal gains although she recognised those to her children:

> *'The playgroup does not use parents as helpers or on the management committee, only its own staff – therefore I have not been involved in any sense other than just taking my children there. However, I'm very pleased with the progress of my children and with the curriculum and the activities they are offered. It's certainly worth the money. They have come on in leaps and bounds'.*

12) 24/09/96, M, 24502, R

M has been involved 'on and off' with the playgroup for eight years. She has not been on the management committee but helps out on a rota basis. Her involvement has been a positive experience in that it has allowed her to meet other parents and increased her participation in the community.

She found it difficult to identify any specific learning outcomes although she was aware that one can absorb information without realising it. She feels she may have acquired a few craft and play organisation skills from helping out on the parent rota and a clearer insight into the problems of some children (such as those with special needs). As a speech therapist she has also become more aware

of language development and how the speed of this can be differ with individuals – *'the variation of norms within normal limits'*. This could, in the future, assist her in her professional work if she has to deal with young children.

She has attended (and very much enjoyed) a Learning Through Play course that was delivered at the playgroup. She participated because she thought it would be useful to her. She was not in employment at the time and it provided an opportunity to get some 'in-service-type development'. She was also interested in the subject which covered areas such as health and safety which she had not considered before. She had acquired a lot of ideas from the course which she has put into practice at home and at another group she is actively involved in – a 'Pram Service' at the local church. M would be interested in attending more PSLA courses if they were delivered locally.

She is a strong supporter of the playgroup movement and feels that children can learn a great deal through play *'perhaps more than is often realised'*.

13) 25/09/96, B, 22108, R

B has been involved with the Pre-school group for less than a year and felt at the beginning of the interview that she had not had the time to acquire any new skills, nor had she joined with that intention: *'One just thinks when joining about meeting other mothers'*. However, on reflection, she recognised that the personal spin-offs have already been quite considerable. She has been helping out on a regular basis and this has helped her to think more about children's play and development:

> *'Being at the playgroup has helped me to see when children are ready to progress on to doing other things. It's given me more understanding and awareness of their development.'*

Other benefits she identified were: meeting local people; helping children and seeing how they interact; gaining insights into group activity and observing how playgroup leaders handle children especially when they are upset or disruptive. As a person who *'emulates others when they do things well'* she feels she has learned a lot from playgroup leaders.

Involvement has therefore given her more confidence in handling children, both her own and others, and has helped her to come to a decision about whether and when to return to work (as a physiotherapist).

14) 25/09/96, M, 25101, O.

M has been involved in this playgroup for two terms having previously been involved in several others. She helps out on a rota basis. She feels she has derived few personal benefits other than making friends and social contacts and having some free time while her children are at the group, which has enabled her to start her own business. She sent the children to the group purely to play and not for her own benefit, and has found that it prepares them very well for starting school. She thinks that the play leader is very good at organising activities for parents and children such as concerts and sports days which she has attended.

As a trained teacher, she feels she had little to learn about children from the group. However, she has been concerned at some of practices she has witnessed

in several playgroups (not just this one). She was worried about staff not greeting children when they arrive, lax time-keeping, too much chatting and leaving children to their own devices during the changeover from one activity to another. Although she recognises that play leaders and helpers are doing 'a grand job':

> *'as a teacher you know what is good practice and they appear to be learning on the job'.*

As she realises that the children gain immeasurably she does not want to interfere or make any negative comments. She has not attended any PSLA courses as she does not feel the need.

15) 25/09/96, R, 23401, P

R has been involved in the playgroup for six years. It is grant-aided as is it is in a deprived area. It is 80% Asian and run by bilingual leaders. As R is in a mixed marriage and her own children are bilingual she is pleased that her children are able to interact with two cultures outside the home:

> *'they were delighted to find other people speak the language they speak to Daddy'.*

Involvement initially helped her to integrate into a new area and meet new people when she had a new baby and she has found it generally a very positive and rewarding experience. It has also helped to broaden her outlook and given her insights into another culture.

She has been on the committee both as secretary and chair and this has enabled her to see how committees work and taken her *'into areas you wouldn't expect'*. As Leicester has been changing to a unitary authority she has had to deal with changes in funding and service level agreements and the legal aspects of these. This has been a real 'learning curve'. She has also witnessed the extent to which being on the committee empowers Asian women many of whom have become more assertive and confident as a result.

She has attended PSLA courses in business and administration and management which she would not have considered participating in had they not been drawn to her attention through the group. These have given her new skills which she feels she brings to her part-time work as a midwife and which she is adding to her CV and portfolio: *'so that people know you're not just vegetating at home'.*

She is now on a school committee and single-handedly runs a parent and toddler group at the church for which she does all the organisation, administration and finance. She does this because she knows how much such a facility has helped her. She feels that she brings a lot of experience and ideas from her playgroup experience and activities to this role.

16) 25/09/96, J, 28303, R

J has been involved in the Pre-school group for 18 months and helps out on a rota basis. She has acquired new friends and a social network through membership of the group and thinks she has learned a lot, particularly about child development. She has realised, for example, that her child is ready for types and levels of play she previously thought were too advanced for him. She has also

learned to be less protective and to let her child learn for himself and find his own feet. As a result he has become more sociable, independent and assertive.

J generally feels she has become a better and more informed parent since becoming involved with a playgroup, and is a less anxious one as she now realises that her child is 'normal' and that any problems she experiences are shared by other parents.

As she already organises play activities and is involved in crafts, J feels that she has not acquired new skills in this area, but that the playgroup experience has reinforced her existing skills and enabled her to adapt them to younger children.

17) 25/09/96, B, 21501, R

B has been a member of the playgroup for about two years, latterly as chair of the management committee. The main gains she identified were a massive increase in confidence and greater insight into children and how they learn: *'which I wouldn't have got if I had just left them there and come home again'*. She feels that this has helped her considerably in her parental role.

The learning outcomes from her committee work have also been wide-ranging: she has learned how to control meetings and to take responsibility for getting things done and making sure the group runs. She has been actively involved in fundraising for a mobile classroom and dealing with agencies such as social services, the county council, the borough architect and other services. She has become adept at contacting other agencies which she would not have had the confidence to deal with prior to her involvement with the Pre-school. She feels these skills are transferable to other areas of her life.

B has become an enthusiastic 'joiner' since getting involved with the playgroup. She is now on the Village Fair Committee and intends to join the school PTA after the mobile classroom project is up and running.

Like several other respondents, she referred to the problem of getting other parents to join the management committee. She feels that parents who just 'dump' their children at the playgroup are missing out on the many different benefits she has gained.

18) 25/09/96, H, 21501, R

H has been connected with this group for six years and is both its co-founder and leader. She also works as an ancillary helper at the local school. She claims to have learned a great deal from the playgroup as well as bringing her own training and instinctive love of children to it. She feels she has learned to handle a lot of responsibility and to support not only the 24 children at the group but also their parents. She has acquired a number of invaluable skills, the most important of which she considers to be communication skills – how to handle people tactfully. For example, she has to guide and inform the management committee and needs to persuade some parents that activities which they consider 'uneducational' and messy such as junk modelling actually teach children useful skills such as hand-eye co-ordination and creativity. She has initiated a learning and development chart for each child with various stages and goals. This is then passed on the reception teacher of the feeder primary school. She has also acquired strong organisational and administrative skills and has become adept at dealing with other agencies.

H 'loves' learning so attends as many PSLA courses as possible (at the last count this was about 14). She has enjoyed and learned a lot from these although she occasionally disagrees with visiting speakers or lecturers who sometimes appear to have a theoretical rather than hands-on knowledge of children:

> *'I don't like people who are not in contact with children saying to me "you must do this"!'*

She is committed to working with children and totally dedicated to the playgroup movement. She intends to go on working at the group because her 'heart is there' although the school keeps trying to poach more of her time.

19) 25/09/96, C, 24502, R

C became involved with this playgroup relatively recently, having previously been a member of another one. She is not actively involved, however, because she has recently acquired paid employment as a manager. The greatest learning outcome she identified was insight into young children's needs and *'how their minds work; how they learn'*. She has also learned how to manage groups of children which she finds entirely different from the managing of adults she does at work.

The playgroup has given her ideas of things to do with her children at home where she has been trying to continue the same kind of activities to help them in their development. She feels that participating in a playgroup helps to prepare children for school and also gives parents a better understanding of the procedures involved in starting school.

C is now considering joining the school PTA. She claims she would not have missed the playgroup involvement because she would have 'lost out'.

20) 24/09/96, B, 22108, R

B was a member of this group for two years and helped out on a regular basis. She found the experience both rewarding and enjoyable. She felt that it helped her enormously in dealing with her own children and gave her ideas about how to keep them occupied at home. It also brought home to her how individual each child is, and helped her to relate to children other than her own.

She did not feel she had acquired any specific new skills other than a slightly greater facility with crafts. However, she found the overall experience so rewarding that she would now like to become qualified to look after children herself. She was not aware of any PSLA courses and did not remember any ever being promoted through the group. She would be interested in a locally delivered course on Pre-school practice if one were offered.

21) 25/09/96, G, 24502, R

G described involvement in a Pre-school group as a tremendously enriching and empowering experience. It had acted as a catalyst in her life and led to a complete change of career.

She was involved in the group for two years with her eldest child and helped out on a rota basis with other parents. She also stood in for the supervisor when she had to be absent. Eventually the supervisor left and the group nearly closed down through lack of a substitute. In the event, although she lacked confidence

in her ability to do so, G agreed to take the post on because she did not want to see the group fold. She then became qualified by taking the Diploma in Pre-school Practice. This whetted her appetite for education and training: *'I got the bit between my teeth'* and she eventually became training co-ordinator on the management committee. As a result of her enthusiasm, the training available *'really escalated'* and she put on courses in Special Needs, Learning Through Play, a First Aid day and other training events. As a result, the group has developed a high profile for training.

Through this G developed an enthusiasm for teaching others and became a tutor on the diploma course. She enjoyed this experience and learned the importance of valuing what others bring to a learning situation. However, she decided that it was children she really wanted to work with and conceived the idea of training as a teacher. At age 36, therefore, and with a background of some O-Levels and secretarial qualifications, G enrolled on a teacher training course – a step that she would never have previously envisaged and which she claims was entirely due to her involvement in the playgroup:

> *'If you'd said to me ten years ago that at age 36 I'd be going to college to get a teacher training qualification I wouldn't have believed you.'*

Thus she claims that she has gained a tremendous amount both personally and professionally from the connection with a Pre-school. The main gains she identified were: increased self-confidence; enrichment and personal development 'in all ways'; new friendships and greater knowledge and understanding of children, which has helped her considerably in her role as parent. She has also learned the importance of communication:

> *'this has become the most important word in my vocabulary. It's not always an easy ride as I've had to learn to manage and handle people effectively even in bad situations'.*

Through her work as training co-ordinator she has acquired skills in budgeting and dealing with other agencies and sponsors. She feels that all these skills will be useful to her when she becomes a teacher.

She claims to have seen a number of other parents blossom as a result of their involvement with the playgroup (although perhaps not quite as spectacularly as she has done):

> *'the knock-on effects can be enormous. I've learned so much through it, it can't be quantified'*

22) 25/09/96, S, 24502, N.

S has been involved with this group for eight months and has mixed feelings about it. Although she is pleased with the activities provided at the group, her child did not initially settle well and she feels staff did not sufficiently help him mix and interact with others, which she thinks is very important. (This problem now seems to have been solved). As she was obliged to stay with her son until he settled in, she has been helping out on regularly an informal basis. She has found this useful as it is her first child and she has learned from seeing other children at different stages of development. She has also acquired some social contacts although these are limited because she does not live in the immediate locality. She could not identify any other specific benefits to herself.

(N.B. Parents are not involved in managing the group which is run by a leader and a helper.)

23) 26/09/96, V, 28303, P.

V has been a member of this group for three and a half years and helps out on a rota basis. She also helps with fundraising. She found it very difficult to identify any personal gains other than the sense of belonging arising from membership of a local group. Although she concedes that she may have derived some new knowledge and skills from her involvement, she could not identify these and said they were too hard to separate out from other influences. The playgroup leader has provided some PSLA courses but she has not been motivated to attend any.

24) 26/09/96, M, 25101, N.

M has been involved for six years and three of her children have participated in the group. She helps out on a rota basis two or three mornings per term. There is no parent committee and the group is managed by paid staff. She has very much enjoyed her involvement and sees the main benefits as those to her children who have thrived there. For herself the main gains have been to make her a better parent - more patient, more understanding and less protective.

M could not identify any specific learning outcomes. When encouraged to reflect, she conceded that she had probably derived some new knowledge and skills from her experience as a helper although she was at a loss to identify any! She had seen notices about some courses and was interested in one but left it too late to apply. She was formerly a child-minder and would like to do this again in the future.

25) 26/09/96, G, 28303, P.

G has been involved in this toddler group for over two years and the greatest benefits have been meeting other parents, sharing experience and 'adult conversation'.

She helps out on a rota basis and is a member of the management committee. From these activities she has acquired insights into child development and how children learn. She has also acquired better communication skills and some skills at team-working. She has attended a PSLA foundation course which she found very useful and learned a lot from. She particularly enjoyed the opportunity it provided for sharing information. She would attend other PSLA courses if they were available.

26) 26/09/96, P, 28102, P.

P has been involved with the Mother and Toddler Group for two years. She has helped out on a rota basis and has recently become group secretary involved in writing letters, compiling newsletters and posters, etc. Although she has made some new social contacts through the group she says she did not really need any. She has not learned anything particularly useful from the experience other than the knowledge that: *'some children are little monsters and others aren't'*. She would prefer her child to go somewhere where they do more structured activities. She made it quite clear that she is not interested either in children or the group!

27) 26/09/96, K, 22108, P.

Although his daughter was only at the group for a short time K became chair of the management committee and retained this role after she left. He used the interview as an opportunity to let off steam about Pre-schools with the PSLA

constitution. He was particularly critical in his observations, making the points that:

- The two-thirds requirement (relating to the representation of current parents on management committees) is too large and almost impossible to meet because of the rapid turnover.

- The fees are unrealistically low and even in the relatively depressed area he lives in could be increased *'without too much pain'*. He claims that even those on unemployment benefit could pay more than £1.20 for a two-hour session. As a result of low fees, the parents are involved in continual fundraising and this is the main item of every management agenda, which makes it very difficult for people to get involved in other things.

- He thinks the name Pre-school Learning Alliance is absurd and not sufficiently clear. He feels that it tries to give a professional image which is against the original PPA ethos. He believes that many people do not become members because they perceive PSLA as being for professionals, therefore the organisation should have kept the playgroup title: *'basically other than the fact that it runs playgroups people don't see any difference between PSLA and the National Childbirth Trust. There are too many organisations and too much overlap.'*

As he is chair of a number of other organisations and teaches others how to run meetings, K feels that he brings a lot of his own skills into the playgroup and does not feel he has acquired any new ones: *'I don't find organising children any different from organising adults. They're just as petty and stroppy!'* From a learning point of view, he feels he has *'picked up'* some things about children in general and his own child in particular which have been useful to him.

He has also derived some personal benefits such as a sense of belonging to the local community and local contacts.

He has heard that the local PSLA branch puts on some courses but complained that they have not been delivered at times when parents could attend, particularly if they are lone parents. He feels that PSLA courses are aimed more at playgroup leaders and supervisors than parents.

28) 27/09/96 L, 23304, N.

L, who has four children, has been involved with the Mother and Toddler group for eight years. She registered with it after she moved to the area and found it was a great way to get to know other parents and children in the neighbourhood: *'the group helps to create a cohesive community'*. She identified this as the main personal benefit she had derived from her involvement.

All parents help at the group which is run on a co-operative basis. This has had some learning outcomes for her. Helping to organise the children at the group has given her insights into how they respond and learn:

> *'I've learned a lot about other children. It gives you a realistic perspective on it, sharing problems and experience with other mums. I'm learning all the time. I've found it's not enough just to give them toys and let them get on with it. They need rituals and structured activities'.*

She has also learned about using crafts as well as transferable skills in fundraising, writing to local firms and agencies, and helping to plan and organise outings, parties and open days.

She was critical of the Alliance for taking on *'desired learning objectives'*:

> *'This freaks me out! I feel children should be playing in a very natural way and should not have to meet government objectives. I know they've had to do this to get government funding but I think it's wrong and gives parents the idea that children should be doing formal learning before they get to school.'*

She feels the Mother and Toddler Group has got the balance right by offering structured play activities and, as the children move to school as a group, prepares them well for the transition.

29) 27/09/96, O, 28303, P.

O has been involved in the toddler group for nearly three years and has found it a generally positive and rewarding experience. It has helped her to deal with her own children, particularly her first child, by providing an opportunity to exchange experience and views with other mothers – *'it's very important for parents to share information and observe other children not just your own.'* Involvement in the group has also helped her to fill a gap in her life after leaving work: *'having given up a career it's given me something else to focus on'.*

From a learning point of view, however, she feels that she has not gained a great deal since she is an experienced adult trainer and finds that there is not a great difference between adult psychology and child psychology. As she is also experienced at group organisation she feels she has not derived any new skills from helping out with organising play and structured activities.

30) 27/09/96, C, 23401, P.

C has been involved with the playgroup for up to four years and has held every position on the committee – chair, secretary and treasurer. Her involvement has given her a lot of information about children and their development: *'I'm amazed at how much I've learned just through observing other children.'* As members of the group are of predominantly Asian origin, she has also learned how to deal with non-English speaking children and those from deprived backgrounds.

This experience has had some useful spin-offs at home and she now tries to spend more time with her own children and to engage them in stimulating activities rather than just leaving them in front of the television. As a result, she finds that her children have become easier to deal with. (She was rather critical of practice in the playgroup where she claims there is little interaction with the children and she feels they are just given toys and left to get on with it.)

Her work on the committee has given her a great deal of new information and skills. She has learned about areas such as tax and insurance and feels she has developed sufficient skills to start a group herself. At the time of the interview she was planning to set up her own Montessori group.

She had not attended any PSLA courses as they were not promoted through the playgroup. However, she was interested in the Diploma course having heard about it from another source.

31) 27/09/96, L, 28102, P.

L has been involved in the Pre-school group for two years and helps out on a rota basis. After joining, she quickly became very interested in working with children and ended up working as assistant to the leader. She then had the opportunity to take the PSLA Diploma course and when the play leader left she was appointed as successor. This was a considerable career change for someone who had formerly worked in a bank and building society but she enjoys this kind of work far more. She now guides the committee on policy and practice and has initiated a number of changes: for example, she has encouraged staff to participate in training courses and has organised more social events for parents.

Apart from the career change she has derived a number of other gains. These she identified as: greater confidence in dealing with people; greater sympathy and understanding towards others; better communication skills; understanding of the benefits to children of attending a Pre-school group; improved administrative skills.

She appreciates the opportunity to take PSLA education and training courses to assist her in the job. She has attended, and encouraged other staff to attend, a PSLA observation and record-keeping course. As a result of attending this course she initiated a 'key worker' system whereby workers divide children into groups of six and observe them while they are involved in a variety of activities. These records are made available to parents and also help workers to assess individual needs and plan the curriculum. The key workers can also make recommendations about how to build on what each child can do so that they are stimulated in a positive way.

L expressed great concern about the nursery voucher scheme and foresaw *'great problems ahead'*. She fears that groups will feel obliged to buy expensive equipment such as computers to comply with OFSTED requirements, which few groups will be able to afford. If they do manage to buy more equipment there could be storage problems in the kind of community premises where many local groups run. She also fears that, with the advent of vouchers, owners of premises will be tempted to put up the hire charges. She therefore believes that a lot of playgroups will fold as a result of the initiative.

32) 27/09/96, W, 24502, P.

W is involved in two playgroups: in one she is employed as assistant play-leader and in the other she helps out on a voluntary basis. She is also employed as a childminder.

Her comments were rather cryptic and it was sometimes necessary to repeat them back to her to clarify whether my interpretation was what she meant to say.

W identified the main personal gain from her involvement as social interaction: *'being able to speak to people who know what I'm on about'*, as she does not get much conversation at home: *'hubby only talks about soft woods and hard woods and joints and doesn't want to know about nowt else!'*

She also enjoys working with small children and is keen on working with crafts – the messier the better. She feels that she has become more confident and articulate as a result of her involvement and that she has improved her team-working and communication skills.

W is very keen on improving herself and has already taken 12 different PSLA courses including the diploma course and one on portage. She started attending the courses in order to help her god-daughter who was not doing well at school, and continued to help her own child who is dyslexic. Now she attends *'anything that's going'* and is currently taking (and enjoying) a course on signing.

33) 30/09/96, S, 24502, P.

S has been involved in the playgroup for two years during which time she has been secretary, vice chair and chair of the committee. The experience has engaged her more in the local community and made her aware of more aspects of life than before when she was practising as a doctor (which she is currently continuing on a very part-time basis because of the ages of her children (two and four).

From a learning point of view, S feels she has gained new insights from observing children other than her own. In addition, her work on the committee has given her skills in taking responsibility, organising people, budgeting, disseminating information and initiating fundraising ideas. It has also taught her more about herself and others:

> *'I've learned who I wouldn't be on a committee with. I know I can't work with dogmatic people and I've learned to spot who I can't work with. It makes you aware of things like this.'*

She has attended a Learning Through Play course and found it more useful than she expected: in particular, it gave her greater confidence as a parent:

> *'It's very valuable for parents. It gives them greater interest and involvement in their children. It helped me to deal with my own children. I'm now more relaxed about what they produce. It's the child, the individual, that matters, not competing with others in their development.'*

Following the course she organised a First Aid course for parents which she would not have thought of doing had she not participated in Learning Through Play. It was very successful. Twelve parents participated and she is thinking of running another: 'I think all parents should do one of these.'

Although becoming involved in the playgroup has not changed her own life to any great degree, she has seen other people blossom:

> *'You can see people really come out of themselves and find their niche through doing this. It fulfils a need for many people'.*

She considers the group as an essential part of the local community, providing a focal point for parents and children and facilitating transition to school: *'We'd be very much worse off without it'*. She thinks they are lucky to have such good play-leaders who work for so little money and is worried that the increased demands on them may result in their good will and dedication being exploited. She is also worried that playgroups like this might be: *'pressurised out of existence in these competing times.'*

34) 30/09/96, E, 23401, P.

E has been involved in the under-fives group for two and a half years and was

formerly a member of the linked Mother and Toddler group from which children progress to the playgroup.

She identified the main personal gain as restoring her social confidence and getting her out among people again after she had moved into the area. Connection with the group had provided her with new social contacts and a sense of belonging to the community. She had given up a well-paid job and involvement with the playgroup is helping to fill the gap.

She worked for a while as the Toddler group leader but considers the playgroup a better environment and better organised: a forward-looking group working constantly towards improvements for the benefit of the children. She helps out on a rota basis and has learned a lot about parenting from the experience:

> *'It's very hard when you have children and haven't any previous experience. It's been a big learning experience for me. I'm learning all the time. I've learned a lot about children and have become involved more with my own child and what he is doing. I've seen from the inside what is going on and feel confident that he is being well looked after.'*

She has also learned a lot about children in general although she admitted that she is mainly interested in the well-being and progress of her own child.

35) 30/09/96, G, 28303, R

G has been an active member of the playgroup for just over a year and helps both on a rota basis and as a committee member. It has provided her with valuable social contacts:*'if I didn't go I probably wouldn't see anybody'* and has given her confidence as a parent:

> *'I was very anxious with my first child and now I feel I know the ropes.'*

The learning outcomes for her have been mainly insights into how children interact and play. She thinks observing other children and their variations in reactions and behaviour has given her useful information about child development and:

> *'what is good or acceptable behaviour. There's such a broad spectrum and development is so changeable. It's helped to put things in perspective and not to compare my children with others as different children do things at different times'.*

She also appreciates the extent to which the group helps children's transition to school and eases them in gradually.

She has also found it useful to be on the committee and have her voice heard. She is currently trying to initiate some social activities for parents as she thinks it benefits mothers to spend some time in exclusively adult company.

36) 30/09/96, R, 28303, R

R has been involved with the playgroup for over four years. She helps out on a rota basis and is a member of a fundraising sub group.

She feels that her involvement has enabled her to understand her own children better as well as providing her with some new information and skills, although she had to think hard to identify these:

> *'It's difficult to realise what one learns. You have to sit back and think about it. I suppose one of the greatest benefits is that it has helped me to get to know other children and realise that I can relate to them. I never thought that I could. When I've helped out at sessions I've really enjoyed it. I've also learned from watching other group leaders and their approach and this has given me ideas'.*

She also feels her interpersonal skills have improved as a result of her involvement in the group.

R has participated in several PSLA courses including ones on safety, special needs and equal opportunities. These have made her *'think about things a lot more'* and as a result, she and other participants have changed some aspects of policy and practice in the group. The course on special needs has enabled her to recognise and deal with different types of behaviour problems.

The playgroup has made a lot of difference to her life in the sense that it has given her a new vocation. It has made her realise that she is interested in working with children so she is envisaging a career change. She is thinking of starting by working in a voluntary capacity. She now works as an ancillary helped at the two schools her older children attend.

She expressed anxiety about a proposal to turn the playgroup into a private organisation as she feels this might have some negative effects and totally change the ethos of the group: *'it will take something away from parents. Currently we have a say in what is going on.'*

37) 30/09/96, G, 22108, N.

G has been involved in the day nursery for two years and formerly helped out on a rota basis. She described it as a rewarding experience. The main gains have been to see how her children interact with other children and other adults as opposed to just the family. She has become more comfortable at leaving her children because she knows how competently they are dealt with and handled. She has also gained insights into children in general:

> *'helping out gives you a wider perspective – seeing how different children react differently to different situations and how important little things, such as regular rituals, are to them. This gives you more information to assess your own child. Otherwise you have to rely on feedback from leaders.'*

Involvement has helped both in her private life as a parent and in her working life as an ESOL teacher. For example, she has discovered that many of her assumptions about adult learners were misplaced. She has found that adults behave in much the same way as children and the group processes are similar:

> *'Some are very passive and just want to be told things and they need to be persuaded to take more responsibility for their own learning. Some are also very passive in groups while others dominate and don't share. We assume that adults have self-discipline and will go away and work on what they've learned but*

they don't. For children what they do in the group is just an extension of what they do at home then gradually their learning becomes more formal.'

There is currently no parents' committee at the group and she regrets this as she likes to be involved with the group rather than just leaving her children at the door.

38) 30/09/96, W, 28303, R

W has been involved with the playgroup for a year and helps there on a rota basis. She is also on the committee where her role is to organise the parent rota. She likes this particular group because the activities are structured and the children know what they are doing and at what time. They have routines and are helped to prepare for school entry. She feels it has been an extremely positive experience for both her son and herself.

One of the principal gains for her has been social contacts: a major reason for joining was that it was a quick way of making new friends and integrating into the community after moving into the locality.

She currently works as a child-minder (which fits in with her own family life) but is a former nurse and midwife and is hoping to return to this kind of work. She already knew a certain amount about children and their development before joining the group although she has learned some new skills and ideas relating to children's play from her involvement. She has also learned how different children are and the different pace at which they develop. In addition, she has realised, from observing playgroup leaders, the importance of how one communicates with children and how unintentionally discouraging her former way of speaking to them may have been: *'You learn how to relate to children and be encouraging to them.'*

Although she has not yet been on any PSLA courses she is now planning to attend a basic course for child-minders.

39) 30/09/96, V, 21501, R

V has been involved with the Pre-school group for three and a half years and is an active member of the committee. The main gain from involvement for her has been meeting others because, with a family and working full-time as a business administrator, she finds little time to socialise.

She also reported some learning gains. For example, she has achieved new insights into how children develop and learn. This was particularly useful when she brought her first child to the group. Her membership of the committee has had spin-offs for her employment by reinforcing her team-working, organisational and administrative skills *'although it's hard to say how much'.*

Her involvement with the group has also helped her in her role as governor of the local primary school, in which capacity she has worked to maintain the links between the playgroup and school:

'We're a very small village school and maintaining numbers is a key priority. We feel it's very important to foster good links with the Pre-school which is in the same catchment area. We feel that by bringing the children and parents into a good relationship with the school they actually see it at first hand and don't

just have to rely on what they hear at a county level'.

She feels that both the school and the playgroup benefit from this link. The school head and reception teacher work closely with the Pre-school: the rising fives in the playgroup have one session a week at the school and the reception teacher regularly visits the group. This makes the transition to school easier for the children.

She believes that it is essential that children should be able to mix in a Pre-school environment but resents the fact that parents have to fund and support groups to the extent that they do: *'this means that some are very active and others do not contribute'.* Like some other interviewees, she feels that the burden of managing a group and fundraising falls too much on the shoulders of a few active members of the committee while others avoid taking on any responsibility. She also feels strongly that the state should be providing more support for Pre-school education and is worried about the potentially damaging impact of the voucher scheme on playgroups.

40) 1/10/96, C, 22108, R

C has been involved in the playgroup for a year and helps out on a rota basis. She had also been involved with a previous group where she had been a member of the committee.

C is enthusiastic about this group which she described as excellent. She likes the fact that it phases children in through a three-stage process in the same room: a drop-in mother and toddler group, a drop-in session where parents stay but children join in normal playgroup activity, and regular sessions where parents help out on a rota basis. This process helped her youngest child who was very 'clingy' to become accustomed to the group where she was eventually happy to be left without her mother.

C has enjoyed being actively involved in the group rather than just leaving her children at the door: *'I think it's very good for parents to stay for sessions'.* This has given her insights into children as a group: *'as a parent one tends to focus only on ones own child: you need a comparison as a mum'.* She has found it reassuring to see how other adults deal with particular situations and has picked up a lot of tips from group leaders and other mothers. She has also acquired interesting ideas about what to do with her children at home where she tends to carry on with on with the same kind of activities: *'because I have seen it there and can appreciate that it works'.* For example, she now has special activity 'corners' at home for her youngest child because that is what happens at the group.

Her involvement has helped her in her other activities. For example, she has become involved with the National Childbirth Trust and her experience at the group has given her the confidence to organise and help to run creches during NCT activities such as roadshows. She has also become involved with other groups of children on a voluntary basis – Beavers and Cubs – directly as a result of her Pre-school experience:

> *'Once you get the confidence to muck in with children you want to go on. I wouldn't have got involved with other groups if I hadn't got the confidence at the playgroup.'*

She had also spent a period as a school governor (though was no longer doing this).

41) 1/10/96 B, 25101, O.

B has been involved with the Pre-school for less than a year and helps out on a rota basis which she enjoys. She identified the most positive gain as new social contacts:

> *'I didn't know anybody before and now I know a lot of the mothers. We're all of a similar age and have common interests.'*

She also feels she has learned a lot from the experience. She has been able to observe her son interacting with other children and has gained ideas about what to do with him at home. She has become less protective and allows him to experiment more freely:

> *'Before I never let him cut things out, I tended to do it for him (it's always easier to do it for them). Now I tend to let him do things himself.'*

Like other mothers she has found that observing a group of children gave her awareness of the fact that they develop at different rates:

> *'I find it very rewarding and to watch children develop is really fulfilling. I was surprised at the rate of change and skill levels in kids. You can see how there are huge changes even with small differences in age.'*

She has realised that the playgroup provides an important informal stimulus to children's early learning and development:

> *'There's much more to it than I thought. It isn't just play, it's educational play. I think playgroups have the edge over a nursery class. I had the choice to send him to a nursery class but I'd rather send him here even though I have to pay. It provides a nice mixture of play and learning. I think nurseries expect children to grow up too soon and it (the learning element) becomes more formal. Also I didn't want him to go every day.'*

Because she has enjoyed the Pre-school experience so much and also because she feels work with children will fit in with her family role, B has decided to take an NVQ in playgroup training offered at the local FE College (a course brought to her attention by the group leader).

42) 1/10/96, J, 28393, R

J has been involved with the toddler group for four and a half years. This is run completely by parents and she is chair of the management committee. Unusually (compared with other interviewees' experience) there is no problem in getting parents to volunteer to come on the committee.

Through helping with the children's activities she has acquired skills at leading play and has learned a great deal about children in the process. She also feels she has learned an enormous amount from helping to run the group: doing the paperwork, budgeting, applying for grants, approaching other agencies such as Social Services and the Probation Service, fundraising, changing premises, insurance matters, heating and lighting, organising events such as open days and

dealing with other people. All of these are new skills and she has also been made *'more aware of what is going on generally'* (in the world outside the home) through these activities.

She identified the most important gains as increased self-confidence and learning how to deal with people. She thinks she has considerably improved her communication and interaction skills as she has learned to delegate and use tact:

> *'in a new environment you have to make sure that you don't tread on people's toes and give everybody a chance to participate.'*

She has attended courses on Learning Through Play, Equal Opportunities and the voucher scheme and is now intending to attend one on special educational needs. She has found all the courses excellent and useful not just in terms of the information that she has received from tutors *('you don't appreciate how much a child learns through play')* but also from sharing information and experience with other course participants from whom she derived many ideas to take back to the group.

J, who works as a childminder, considers the PSLA courses are important to her for career reasons. She is anxious to attend as many as possible but feels that the way information about them is disseminated is inadequate. In one case she received details about a course four days before it actually started. In such cases there is not enough time to contact group members many of whom might be interested in attending:

> *'As we only meet for three sessions a week there's little time to advise parents and when details arrive so late they've either not got time to do anything about it or we're told that courses are already full. Sometimes we've been told that a course didn't recruit enough people although a lot of our parents would have gone if we'd known about it in time'.*

On another occasion, a number of parents signed up to join an Introduction to Child Observation course, but were not notified about when the first session was to be held. Another problem was that some courses which were formerly free now cost £15 which some parents cannot afford: *'Although the group can subsidise one person to go we can't afford to subsidise the large number who are interested.'*

43) 1/10/96, B, 25101, N.

B has been involved with the Pre-school for just under two years. Her child was very 'clingy' and attending the group has been 'perfect' for him. She has personally enjoyed being involved as it has given her the opportunity to meet other children and mothers. She is on the parent helper rota and this has been very useful to her as she has been able see how her son behaves and develops in comparison with other children. Observing children and talking to other parents has given her more confidence both in dealing with her child – *'I've learned not to worry about him'* – and in interacting with other adults. She now feels she is more aware of what is useful and stimulating for children. She has gained ideas about creative play – making and doing things with her son at home and keeping him and any visiting children occupied. So she feels the Pre-school experience has had useful spin-offs in her home life.

She praised the group and the structured way in which activities are arranged. She feels that it really helps children in their transition to school and she is now

very pleased that her son has attended the playgroup rather than the school nursery class as it has helped him so much.

44) 3/10/96, S, 28303, R

S has been involved with the Pre-school of which she was a co founder for nearly three years. It runs for three sessions a week and is staffed totally by parents who help on a rota basis. She has been on the committee for most of the time and is currently secretary.

She is tremendously enthusiastic about the group and feels she has gained a great amount from being involved in it. As a parent she has become more patient, confident and relaxed with her own children and understands from observing children in a group that they all develop at different speeds: *'I know now that they all get there in the end'.*

She has also become more confident at dealing with children other than her own and feels she can now speak and relate to them in an appropriate way. She has learned how to organise play, use crafts, etc, and tries to integrate ideas that people bring from the Learning Through Play course in group activities.

Her work on the committee has given her insights into how to run a committee and valuable experience in decision-making. It has also given her skills such as communicating with other parents and agencies such as Social Services and the Charity Commission. She has also become adept at filling in forms and dealing with areas such as fire regulations, etc. She identified the greatest personal gains as increased self-confidence, social contacts and better communication skills. Living in an isolated part of the country she feels she would not see anybody were it not for the group.

She described her Pre-school involvement as *'surprisingly positive'*. Having left her job after starting a family she has found working with the group helped to *'focus'* her again: *'I'm really proud of what I'm doing'*. It has also led to a complete career change. A former micro-biologist and manager, she is now about to take a PGCE to enable her to teach in primary schools: *'I'd never have thought of doing this before.'* She is really looking forward to teaching as a career and would like to think that other teachers: *'are there because they want to be and not because they can't think of anything else to do.'*

45) 3/10/96, B, 23304, R

B has been involved with this playgroup for eight years and her four children have attended. At first she just helped out on a parent rota, then she became a paid helper and ultimately the supervisor. As she was a carer with the elderly, this has been an important career change. In order to gain an appropriate qualification she took the PSLA Diploma course which she enjoyed very much and learned a great deal from. She is very pleased to have this extra qualification which she has already used in applying for jobs, one of which she has been offered but turned down. However, she has started to foster children and has been asked by Social Services to help out in a home liaison scheme.

She has also attended a number of other PSLA courses which she has found useful. She was pleased that these were free as she thinks she may not have been able to attend otherwise. She is now planning to attend a curriculum planning course and an information day on the voucher scheme. She expressed some

anxiety about the impact of vouchers which she feel may result in the closure of the group which has been established for 23 years. She feels children benefit more from playgroup than from a school nursery class:

> *'They teach children to socialise. I stress to parents that we are not a nursery school. I don't think we should send children to school at four. They're going to be there for years anyway. It's too long.'*

She is also worried about the increasing problem of getting parents to participate in the rota scheme.

46) 4/10/96, F, 28303, P.

F has been involved in the playgoup for five years. She helps out on a rota basis twice a term and has also served on the committee where her principal role was to organise day trips.

She feels she has not acquired any new skills from the committee experience or from her connection with the group in general since she already had skills from her professional experience as a teacher. The main benefit for her has been meeting other mothers and the socialisation of her children within the group. She feels, however, that she has learned something from meeting children other than her own. She is a sixth form teacher and the playgroup experience has taught her more about younger children and how they react in different situations: *'it has extended my knowledge'*. She found it difficult to identify any other learning outcomes.

She described the group is the focus of the village life and considers the activities to be very well structured. Although it has very good links with the local school and they work together, she is worried about the potential impact of the voucher scheme on the group.

47) 8/10/96, D, 25101, O.

D was only involved with the playgroup for a term as her daughter who has special educational needs was referred to the nursery class at school. She flourished at the group and found it harder to adjust to the nursery.

D was formerly a paediatric dentist and therefore already had considerable experience and skills in dealing with children. However, she had encountered some difficulty in coping with her own child and found the playgroup very useful in this respect. She found the leaders and helpers very supportive as they were used to children with special needs: *'speaking to leaders has helped me to see that other parents have the same problems as me.'*

Although she was only involved with the group for a limited time she helped out on a rota basis and found it useful to see how other children behaved and developed. The playgroup experience also helped her daughter to learn how other children behaved as a group involved in specific activities at certain times:

> *'It was good for her to be with other children and see how they behave and observe routines. This has helped her at school and it's also helped me at home.'*

She thinks that playgroups are very important and would not think twice about sending another child to one, right up to school age.

48) 8/10/96, P, 25101, P.

P has been involved in the Pre-school for one and a half years having previously been involved in another in a different area. She joined this group after moving into the locality. As she had young children, she considered it the best way of meeting other adults and children, and it has fulfilled this purpose by giving her new contacts and increasing her social confidence:

> *'You lose some confidence when you're just with children at home. You fall into the trap of just being a mum and everything just revolves around the kids. You lose that thing about doing things for yourself. So I probably gained some confidence to talk to other adults'*

She has helped out at the group on a rota basis but found it difficult to identify any specific learning outcomes from doing so other than acquiring some skill at coping with larger numbers of children: *'it's the same thing as at home only on a larger scale!'*

Although both of her children are now at school she still helps out at the group when asked and is still very involved with it. She also helps out with organising social and fundraising events which she admits may have provided her with transferable skills.

Her life has generally opened up since she joined the group (although she could not identify to what extent this was a consequence of her involvement or just a natural progression that would have happened anyway as her children got older). She works as a mobile hairdresser and has recently also taken a job as a technician in the beauty department of the local FE college. She has also joined the local school PTA.

She feels that the playgroup, and the local school, are the centre of the small village community and most village activities revolve around them: *'They provide people with necessary social connections and people then proceed to other social activities. They also provide continuity for the children who move from the playgroup to the school as a group.'*

49) 14/10/96, E, 21501, N.

E has been involved in the mother and toddler group for about eighteen months and is now group secretary. It is a very small group and entirely parent run, which she feels is an advantage:

> *'It gives you time to talk and share experience and gives stimulus to mothers. It's very important to have other parents there and to find out that your kid is normal! It also gets you out of the house.'*

She is one of life's 'joiners' and found it difficult to separate the specific benefits from being involved in the group from those she derives from membership of other organisations. She is a member of the National Childbirth Trust, runs a Guide company and is secretary of the organisation 'Friends of Guiding' so feels she already has extensive experience of working with children and secretarial and committee work. She also intends, when her children move on to school, to be involved with school committees such as the PTA. However, this is the first time she has worked with very young children and she admits that she is 'learning all the time about what is suitable for them and what they

are capable of' although she wonders whether she would not have acquired this knowledge anyway '*just from being a mum*'.

One of the other major gains she identified is that the group has helped her son to mix with other children, although this could also have been due to the connection with the NCT.

As group secretary she receives a lot of 'literature and bumph' from the PSLA and wonders whether it is relevant to what they do at the group as it is so small. However, she admires the PSLA ethos. She is also connected with another playgroup which she does not like so much as parents are not involved:

> *'I don't have much of a say whereas here every person's voice is listened to. That's very important to me.'*

50) 25/10/96, C, 28303, R

C was involved in this playgroup for just over a year. By the time of the interview she had moved to another area and joined another PSLA group, seeing this as an important way of getting to know other mothers and becoming part of the community. She was about to join the management committee in order to become more involved. Membership of the playgroups has provided her with important social contacts and helped her children to interact with others.

C found it difficult to identify any specific learning outcomes from her involvement with the Pre-school groups. Since she had taken a college course in Community Care and had previously worked at a school for blind children, she felt she already had a certain knowledge of children and skills in dealing with them. However, she had found that observing children with particular physical or other conditions at the playgroups had made her more aware of such problems. Her own child has a speech problem which improved dramatically when she started at the group.

Conclusions

This study did not presuppose that adults become involved in a Pre-school exclusively or primarily for their own benefit (although some respondents appeared to think this was the assumption behind the survey). It did, however, start from the premise that there are likely to be positive learning outcomes for adults who become involved in the running of groups. The results of the exercise confirmed decisively that this is the case, especially for first-time parents, those with few qualifications and limited employment experience and those who are geographically or socially isolated.

The research was concerned with 'learning' in the broad sense of acquisition of knowledge and skills, both personal and occupational, that may help people in any aspect of their lives. For many people, the word 'learning' has connotations of formal schooling which they would not associate with their informal involvement with a Pre-school group. However, participation in voluntary groups often leads to learning outcomes even though these are often unintended and unrecognised, and both the survey and the interview findings indicated that a wide range of incidental as well as formal learning can be achieved through involvement in Pre-schools. Often this is interrelated with and dependent on personal development gains such as greater self-confidence and more positive feelings about oneself.

Some respondents thought it selfish and inappropriate to consider the value of Pre-schools to themselves and the majority wished to stress, first, the benefits to their children. When encouraged to reflect on their own experience, however, the majority identified a range of important benefits many of which could be classified as learning outcomes, although few would have described them as such. The range and impact of these varied according to the length and degree of their involvement with the Pre-school group. Those who were actively engaged in the running of groups and management committees inevitably gained more than those whose involvement was limited to helping out occasionally on the parent rota.

Social interaction

Making new contacts was considered the most important personal benefit and for many this had been a major reason for joining in the first place. The research indicated that social isolation is a key motivator for becoming involved in a Pre-school. A significant number of respondents had joined a group after moving to a new area, specifically in the hope of meeting other parents and children, and it had considerably aided their integration into the new community. Many had also joined a group after having their first child. Becoming part of the local community was perceived as very important by most mothers, regardless of their educational and occupational background.

Increased confidence in parenting

A very important result of involvement in a Pre-school was that it had increased respondents' confidence in their parenting role. Virtually all interviewees said how useful it had been to compare notes and share experience with other parents. Many had also found it valuable to observe and interact with a group of children as it showed them that all children are different and develop at different speeds. As a result, they had become more relaxed about their children's development

and no longer viewed it as a 'race' or competition with other children. Participation in a Pre-school group had also reassured new mothers that their child was exhibiting 'normal' behaviour patterns and that they were not alone in any problems they faced.

Many parents reported that they had learned to organise, structure and manage children's play and had acquired an understanding of how children learn through play. As a result, they were able to stimulate their own children in more creative ways at home and a number reported improved relationships with them.

Transferable skills

The majority of respondents who were actively involved in management committees as chairs, secretaries or treasurers had developed a range of transferable practical skills such as chairing meetings, taking minutes, doing accounts, record-keeping, organising, fundraising and dealing with issues to do with insurance, staff pay, hire of premises and safety. The acquisition of such skills had significantly increased confidence levels, as a result of which some had developed an interest in seeking or changing employment

Many respondents had also improved their social and communication skills and become effective team-workers. Some said they had become more effective in social relationships and a number had become adept at dealing with external agencies such as Social Services.

Application of skills

A number of respondents were already putting their Pre-school skills and experience to good use in the home, in their other community roles or in their current employment. Some were incorporating them in their CV and using them to find employment.

For some, involvement had been nothing less than a catalyst which had had a dramatic effect on their lives and future direction. As a result of their Pre-school experience, a number of interviewees had embarked upon or were contemplating a total career change involving working with children. Some were taking teacher training qualifications; others had become playgroup leaders or had founded and were running mother and toddler groups and a significant number had become school governors. Virtually all said they would *not* have considered undertaking these activities had they not become involved in a Pre-school group.

It could be suggested that respondents may have exaggerated some of the benefits they cited because they wanted to give the kind of answers they thought would be most acceptable, or because they were Pre-school enthusiasts and therefore predisposed to be positive. The telephone interviews revealed the opposite to be the case: far from exaggerating, many individuals had in fact downplayed or *underestimated* the gains, either because they had not fully recognised them or because they did not want to suggest they had become involved in a group for their own benefit. Some interviewees who had reported few positive outcomes on the questionnaire were surprised, when invited to discuss their experience, to realise how much they had gained from participating in activities such as helping out on a rota basis or being on the management committee. Some volunteered that, on reflection, they had indeed learned a great deal, and far more than they had thought. Given the frequency with which such comments were made , it is reasonable to assume that, had all the survey respondents been interviewed, this would have turned out to be a common finding.

Participation in PSLA courses

The research revealed that attendance on PSLA courses is strongly dependent firstly on good dissemination of information to members of groups and, secondly, on *local* delivery. None of the interviewees who had attended PSLA courses had been seeking the same type of course elsewhere. All had considered participating solely because courses were drawn to their attention through the group, and the key factor enabling their attendance was the fact that courses were delivered *'on the doorstep'*. Another important factor in decisions to attend had been the fact that, at the time of the research, courses were free.

Participants had unanimously enjoyed the experience of returning to learning and in a number of cases, attendance at one course had stimulated interest in attending others. Some respondents had become learning enthusiasts as a result of attending PSLA courses.

In conclusion, therefore, the study provided strong evidence of a parallel process of development – one for the child and one for the parent. Looking at the results as a whole, there was a striking similarity in responses despite the disparity of individuals and geographical locations. For the majority, involvement had been an enriching and empowering experience leading to a fuller life. From a learning viewpoint, the most important findings were: first, that respondents had gained a greater understanding of children and their development as a result of which many felt they were better parents; and second, that many had developed transferable skills which had increased their confidence and contributed to a striking increase in community activism as well as to new employment or education directions. Most of this learning was incidental and not intentional but it was probably more effective than anything that could be acquired in a formal classroom setting. Those who were actively involved in running a group clearly derived the most substantial benefits and these were particularly significant for first-time parents, single parents, women with limited employment experience and those who had left school at age 16. These groups were the most likely to report increases in self-confidence and enhanced interpersonal and practical skills. They were also the most likely to report wider aspirations and an interest in seeking employment or other learning activities. These results have important implications for social policy.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

OUTCOMES OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRE-SCHOOL LEARNING ALLIANCE

We would be very grateful for your co-operation in answering the following questions. The details are required to help build a picture of what skills, knowledge and personal benefits individuals gain from their involvement in pre-schools. All replies will be treated in confidence. Please return in the pre-paid envelope provided.

NAME AND LOCATION OF PRE-SCHOOL GROUP:

Group Name .....

Branch No ..... **Membership No** .....

A PERSONAL DETAILS

1. Age Group: (please tick appropriate box)

   15-19 ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ 60+ ☐

2. Ethnic Background: are you

White	☐	Indian	☐
Black - Caribbean	☐	Pakistani	☐
Black - African	☐	Bangladeshi	☐
Black - other	☐	Chinese	☐
Other	☐		

3. At what age did you leave school?

   15 ☐ 16 ☐ 17 ☐ 18 ☐ Other (please specify) .....

4. What academic qualifications did you have **before** your involvement in the Pre-school Learning Alliance?

No qualifications	☐	NNEB	☐
O'levels/GCSEs	☐	BEd	☐
A'levels	☐	BA	☐
City & Guilds	☐	BSc	☐
BTEC	☐	Teacher Training	☐
RSA	☐	Cert Ed	☐
Other	☐		

   (please specify) .....

5. At the time of your involvement with pre-schools are/were you:

A full time homemaker	☐
Employed full-time	☐
Employed part-time	☐
Self-employed	☐
Registered unemployed	☐
Retired	☐
Other	☐

   (please specify) .....

B PERSONAL GAINS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN PRE-SCHOOLS

6. What do you think, from your point of view, are the most significant personal benefits you have derived from your involvement in pre-schools? (Please tick responses that are most applicable to you.)

	Extremely Significant	Very Significant	Quite Significant	Not Significant
Greater self-confidence & self-esteem				
Improved social skills				
New practical skills (eg using hands, making things)				
Improved organisational skills				
Improved communication skills				
Improved literacy/numeracy skills				
Improved sense of general well-being				
Better relationships with children				
Better relationships with other family members				
Greater interest in child development				
Increased knowledge of child development				
Increased ability to help children learn				
Increased ability to organise and manage children's play activities				
Wider personal aspirations				
Greater readiness to seek employment				
Interest in a wider range of jobs				
New friends and social contacts				

	Extremely Significant	Very Significant	Quite Significant	Not Significant
No perceived gains				

Other (please specify) .....

.....

.....

C. PERSONAL GAINS FROM ATTENDING PRE-SCHOOL LEARNING ALLIANCE COURSES

7. Have you attended any Pre-school Learning Alliance courses?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you have answered YES, please answer Question 8; if you have answered NO, please pass to Question 10.

8. Which of the following courses have you attended?

Diploma in Pre-school Practice	☐	Special Needs	☐
Foundation	☐	Business Side	☐
Basic	☐	Tutor Fieldwork	☐
Child Development	☐	Equal Opportunities	☐
First Aid	☐	Introduction to child observation	☐
Learning through play	☐	Committees	☐
Parents/carers	☐	Planning the pre-school curriculum	☐
Study skills	☐	Business & Administration	☐
Management	☐	Care & Education for under-twos	☐
Parent & toddler	☐	Other (please specify)	☐

9. What do you think, from your point of view, are the most significant skills, knowledge or personal benefits you have derived from attending Pre-school Learning Alliance courses? (Please tick the responses that are most applicable to you.)

	Extremely Significant	Very Significant	Quite Significant	Not Significant
Improved ability to study/undertake formal learning				
Increased knowledge about how children (and adults) learn				
Greater confidence in own ability to learn				
Confidence & motivation to undertake other learning activities/specific education courses				
Gaining a qualification or possibility of progression towards a qualification				

	Extremely Significant	Very Significant	Quite Significant	Not Significant
Increased knowledge & understanding of child development(physical/educational/social)				
Increased knowledge & understanding of child health, nutrition, or safety				
Increased knowledge & understanding of children with disabilities or special needs				
Greater understanding of the value of play				
Ability to organise & manage play activities				
Increased knowledge about how children (and adults) learn				
Knowledge & understanding of legislation affecting children and services for children				
Knowledge & understanding of legislation affecting voluntary & charitable organisations				
Greater knowledge/understanding of equal opportunities issues				
Improved literacy and numeracy skills				
Improved analytical skills				
Organisational and administration skills				
Business and financial management skills				
Fundraising skills				
People management skills (eg organising staff or volunteers)				
No perceived benefits				

Other (please specify) .....

.....

.....

.....

D OUTCOMES OF INVOLVEMENT IN PRE-SCHOOLS (INCLUDING EITHER PLAYGROUPS OR COURSES)

10. How have you used the skills and knowledge you have gained through your involvement in pre-schools? (Please tick boxes)

At home	☐
In other organisations	☐
In my current employment	☐
In own or family business	☐
To help me change jobs	☐
To help me obtain a job	☐
To move into further education or training	☐
To move into higher education	☐
To gain a qualification	☐
Other	☐

(please specify) .....

E Would you be willing to be interviewed (by telephone or in person) to explore some of these questions in more depth. ?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES, please could you fill in the following:

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

..... Tel No: .....

Please note that your personal details will not be used in any other way and your responses will not be identified.

Please return to Research & Information Department, Pre-school Learning Alliance, 69 Kings Cross Road, London WC1X 9LL by **15 July 1996.**

Appendix B:
Telephone interview schedule

Questions centred on:

- Length of involvement with the Pre-school group
- General reactions: experience of the group, both self and child
- Learning outcomes arising from observing and interaction with children and group leaders
- Personal gains from involvement (e.g. social contacts, increased confidence, improved inter-personal skills)
- Practical skills derived from involvement
- Ways in which involvement may have helped interviewees at home, in the community or in employment roles
- Developments in interviewee's life (e.g. changes of aspiration/direction) that have been influenced by, involvement with the Pre-school

Interviewees who had attended PSLA courses

- Reasons for participating
- How they found out about the course(s)
- Whether they were looking for/considering attending a similar course before hearing about the PSLA one
- Awareness of education courses provided by other bodies
- Reactions to PSLA course(s)
- Outcomes of participation
- Willingness to attend other PSLA courses or those organised by other providers
- Current attitude to education/training

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